



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Uncompahgre Field Office
2465 S. Townsend Avenue
Montrose, Colorado 81401
www.blm.gov



Dear Stakeholder:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is proposing a project to create openings in the continuous piñon juniper (PJ) woodlands that currently occupy much of Wolf Park and the southern face of Oak Mesa. The continuous PJ woodlands on public lands, adjacent to private lands, present a wildfire concern for both federal and volunteer firefighters. Additionally, a large fire event in the project area presents concerns regarding the potential for erosion damaging the Fire Mountain Canal, or debris flows in Short Creek, Jay Creek, or portions of Leroux Creek. The erosion potential could impact the town of Hotchkiss, adjacent private lands, or Highway 133. The proposed project is located approximately three miles north of Hotchkiss in Delta County, CO, between Leroux Creek and the Wakefield Mesa wildfire. The 10,970 acre project area is entirely on public lands managed by the BLM-Uncompahgre Field Office (Map 1, location map).

The project is designed to address the desired future condition/community vision set forth by the Hotchkiss Fire Protection District (HFPD) Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The proposed project would address the values identified in the Hotchkiss CWPP by reducing wildland fuels and create a more fire resilient landscape on the BLM-managed public lands immediately north of the town of Hotchkiss.

The primary objectives identified in the Hotchkiss CWPP that this project would address include:

- Minimize death and injury due to wildfire
- Private property protection
- Reduce the frequency, intensity and size of wildfires in the planning area
- Protect the viewshed
- Protect watersheds above the Town of Hotchkiss
- Reduce the chance of flooding and erosion above and in the Town of Hotchkiss

Within the project area there are four previous vegetation treatments that occurred from 1982 to 2003 and nine previous wildfires scattered across the landscape. The project seeks to create additional mosaic openings in the PJ woodlands, thereby limiting the potential for large fire growth. The proposal is to treat 40-60% of the currently untreated or undisturbed project area by mechanically thinning two units, retreating a previous chaining, and conducting prescribed fire treatments. The specific details of the proposed project are:

Mechanical Thinning:

- mechanically thin with a hydro-ax 156 acres of PJ woodland and seed native grasses and forbs in Short Draw to reduce the potential for sustained crown fire,
- mechanically thin approximately 400 acres of oak brush and PJ woodland on the top of Oak Mesa on the southern end of the mesa top. The purpose for this treatment would be to prevent wildfire or prescribed fire from impinging upon private lands from below.

Retreating Previous Chaining:

- Mechanically remove much of the juniper regeneration in 121 acres that was chained in 1982. In the 28 years since treatment, the site has seen substantial reestablishment of young juniper woodland.

The tree regeneration, coupled with the significant woody debris remaining on the site, has created an unnatural fuels situation. In a wildfire scenario, this would allow the site to burn unnaturally hot and spread under much lower environmental conditions. The woody debris that remains from the chaining would be cleared with a prescribed burn. After burning, the area would be seeded with native grasses and forbs.

Prescribed Fire Treatments:


The remainder of the project area is too steep to safely or economically operate mechanical thinning equipment. On these steeper areas BLM is proposing a series of small (5-100 acres) prescribed fires across 40-60% of the project area. The objective is to limit mortality of perennial bunch/sod grasses and forbs to 10-15% and kill 60-100% of juniper and piñon trees to further break up woodland canopies. Woodlands with canopies greater than 20%, or with a component of oak brush, would be the target areas. Within the project area, these areas would facilitate the greatest amount of spread under the identified burning conditions, and would serve to reduce the greatest crown fire potential. Because of watershed concerns, these prescribed fires would occur over a ten to fifteen year period to limit the amount of acreage in a given watershed that is influenced by prescribed fire at one time - no more than 200-300 acres would be burned in any watershed in a given year. This mitigation still allows for 600-900 acres to potentially be burned in a given year within the project area provided the acreage is spread over multiple watersheds. To further reduce impacts, a watershed receiving prescribed fire would not be looked at for subsequent burning for a minimum of two growing seasons to allow for herbaceous ground cover establishment thus providing for soil and watershed stabilization. No follow-up burning would be considered until adequate perennial herbaceous cover has established to effectively limit soil erosion and accelerated hydrologic response to typical rainfall events. Prescribed fire will only be implemented when weather conditions are favorable for small fire growth and good smoke dispersal (early spring, late fall, or possibly early winter). The areas influenced by prescribed fire would be seeded with native grasses and forbs to accelerate perennial ground cover establishment and soil stabilization. The projected acres to be burned over the life of the project would be approximately 3,200-4,800 acres.

We are soliciting your comments on this proposal to help identify any issues or concerns so they may be considered in the environmental analysis and decision making process. Please be specific in describing your concerns, recommendations, or how the proposal may affect you. It would be especially helpful if you would make note of any areas of concern on the attached maps and mail or fax it with your comments. This document, including the maps, is also available online at http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/BLM_Information/nepa/ufo.html.

We would appreciate any comments or questions regarding this project. Although comments are welcome any time, please send them by **March 21, 2011** so that we can incorporate them into our planning process as early as possible.

Please send your comments to: Ken Holsinger (Fuels Specialist), Bureau of Land Management, 2465 South Townsend Ave., Montrose, CO 81401. You can also contact Ken at 970-240-5389 (office), 970-240-5368 (fax) or email comments to ken_holsinger@blm.gov.

Sincerely,



Barbara L. Sharrow
Field Manager

Enclosures: Map 1, Location map